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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of practices in small rural elementary schools in Ireland and recent trends related to school size. There are 3,200 "ordinary" elementary schools in the Republic of Ireland serving children aged 4-12 in eight levels: two preschool levels and grades 1-6. System-wide policies with implications for small schools include staffing policies that can result in 57 students in a one-teacher school, the denominational nature of the system and the hegemony of school management by the Catholic church, high teacher-pupil ratios, and the absence of administrative principals in schools with fewer than eight teachers (about 77 percent of all elementary schools). Over half of all Irish elementary schools have fewer than five teachers, but there is no weighted funding to compensate for small size. As the school population has declined since the 1960s, policymakers have actively promoted the closing of small schools. A 1991 international evaluation recognized the benefits of small schools but nevertheless encouraged consolidations aimed at four-teacher schools, a recommendation that would result in the closure of 1,357 schools. Subsequent debate highlighted the general lack of policy in relation to small schools and the ways in which current policies disadvantage small schools further and damage their viability. Research and policy needs of small rural schools are discussed. (Contains 20 references.) (SV)

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SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS IN IRELAND: PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

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SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS IN IRELAND: PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 1990s, small rural schools have become a political issue in the Irish context. Their relative invisibility as an issue until recently is rather surprising as traditionally Ireland has been an agricultural society. It is important therefore, to set out the policies pursued in recent decades and the structural context which has led to the dramatic decline in the number of small rural schools, their relative neglect and demise. However, I begin with a short description of the system of primary schooling in general.

Primary Schooling in Ireland: Structures, Policies and Traditions

There are 3,200 ordinary[1] primary schools in the Irish Republic which cater for children from age 4 -12 in eight age cohorts: junior and senior infants, and grades one to six. Though the statutory age for school entry is six, more than 50% of children attend school in the September following their fourth birthday, while virtually 100% of children are in school by age five.

The length of the school year, 183 days, is rather short by international comparison (Burke, Dobrich, and Sugrue, 1991, 1992), and instruction time is eroded further by the practice of taking half-days for staff meetings though this is more a feature of larger urban schools than small rural ones. The total length of the school day is approximately 5 hours and 10 minutes, with 30 minutes being specified for religious instruction, 10 minutes for a short break during the morning, with most schools opting for a 30 minute break around midday. Opening hours are more circumscribed in small rural schools as they are dependent on a publicly funded school transport system to get pupils to school on time when busses service several schools.

The tradition of early school attendance is primarily a consequence of large families, and this enables the Irish government to claim that it has one of the best pre-school provisions in Europe, when, in truth, pre-school provision has been neglected and left largely in the hands of private enterprise. The absence of systematic pre-school facilities, particularly in rural areas, means that children are more likely to begin school just as soon as they become 4 years old Indeed, it is not unknown for principals of small rural schools to seek out these children as their presence on a school roll can make all the difference to retention or appointment of a teacher. A brief look at appointment and retention figures indicate that marginal but important concessions are made in the case of small schools, but this system is far too rigid.

Table 1: Enrolments, Appointments and Retentions

Assistant	First Appointment	Retention Figure
1st	28	25
2nd	61	58
3rd	94	91
4th	127	127
5th	160	160

These figures are absolute so that a school with an enrolment figure of 57 is reduced to one teacher. Elsewhere, in such circumstances, it is possible to allocate part of a teacher's time to a school, and this more flexible approach will be necessary to safeguard the quality of teaching and learning in small rural schools as well as for securing their future.

To date, provision of specialist teachers, other than remedial teachers, has been resisted by policy makers, so that all teachers are qualified to teach the complete age range in primary schools while a change of emphasis in this regard is under active consideration (Ireland, 1995).

The major change in Irish primary schooling was the official adoption of a policy of child-centredness in 1971. This 'radical' shift in policy was endorsed by teachers as it was a welcome departure from a highly centralised, prescribed and circumscribed curriculum which focused almost exclusively on 'the basics' which, in the Irish context, continue to be Irish, English and Mathematics (Sugrue, 1991; Coolahan, 1981; O'Buachalla, 1988; McDonagh, 1969). Implementation of an activity-based approach to teaching and learning is particularly problematic in small schools with inadequate resources and where teachers have responsibility for multiple-classes (OECD, 1991).

Management Structures and School Size

Another system-wide issue with major implications for the number of small rural schools is the denominational nature of the system and its management structure. It is frequently suggested that the Irish education system is simultaneously highly centralised and decentralised. Though there are plans to create intermediate structures between the Department of Education and individual schools in the form of Regional Education Boards (REBs), at present each school has its own board of management with teacher and parent representation while the pivotal position of chairperson is retained by clergy (Ireland, 1995). Schools continue to be built primarily on a parish basis and this too leads to further proliferation of small schools. In the case of smaller denominations such as Church of Ireland schools in a system that remains overwhelmingly Catholic in terms of school management, their precariousness warranted special mention in a recent OECD report on the Irish educational system. It says of Church of Ireland schools that:

> Twenty three percent of the number have only one teacher. Two-teacher schools account for a further thirty eight percent. Altogether, over seventy-five per cent of the Protestant national schools have three or fewer teachers and

only about two per cent of the total have non-teacher principals (OECD, 1991, p. 58).

In the past decade, hegemony of school management by the Catholic church has been eroded by the development of fifteen multi-denominational schools and the growth in popularity of Irish medium primary schools totalling just over 100 at present (Ireland, 1995). In fact, an additional nine Irish medium schools opened their doors for the first time in September 1996. At a time when enrolments are declining rapidly, this diversification is likely to lead to a general reduction in school size and greater competition between schools for enrolments. A brief look at enrolments over a period of time underlines this trend.

Table 2: Teacher/Pupil Ratios in Irish Primary Schools

Year	Enrolment	No. of Teachers	Ratio
1961/62	484, 618	14, 091	34.4
1971/72	511, 254	15, 450	33.1
1981/82	556, 434	19, 926	27.9
1985/86	567, 615	21, 144	26.8
1991/92	534, 269	20, 672	25.8
1994/95	491, 256	20, 901	23.5

[* These data have been taken from the OECD report, 1991, and Annual statistics published by the Department of Education, 1991-92, 1994-95].

Despite the obvious improvements in class size during the past 30 years, more than 280, 000 children continue to be taught in classes with 30-39 pupils, and almost 9, 000 in classes with 40 pupils or more (Department of Education, 1994/95).

Management Structures in Schools

There are very few management structures within primary schools either large or small. Schools with 8 teachers or more have administrative principals (with no teaching

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responsibilities) but 2,483 schools or 77.5% of the total have less than 8 teachers. Principals in schools with 8 teachers or less have fulltime teaching duties, many of who do not have secretarial assistance. Additionally, the role of vice-principal is very poorly defined and while there are posts of responsibility in schools to which specific duties are attached such as library, these duties cannot interfere with class teaching but neither are post holders obliged to do additional work outside of school hours. Consequently, in many instances, principals attend to administrative duties after school, and issues such as staff development and instructional leadership are aspirations rather than actualities for the majority. Clearly the absence of senior and middle-management structures and positions in schools have greater negative consequences for small rural schools.

Small Rural Schools

As indicated at the outset, Irish society has become urbanised very rapidly during the past twenty-five years. Consequently, many smaller schools have been closed, but with the decline in the birthrate, many smaller schools are destined to loose teachers in the years ahead. Table three below indicates the manner in which primary schooling has moved, since the early sixties through a period of rapid expansion to one of contraction.

Table 3: Population trends

Number of Students (000s)			
Year	**1965**	**1991**	**2001**
Primary	**505**	**553**	**421**

On September 2nd 1996, almost 11,000 less children began primary schooling than in 1995 (Cullen, 1996). Not surprisingly, this dramatic downward trend is having specific negative consequences for smaller schools, particularly due to the rigidity of retention figures outlined

in table 1. Table 4 indicates how trends in fertility rates, changing patterns in emigration and the growth in urbanisation have impacted on school size during the past 30 years.

Table 4: Patterns in School Size 1961-1995

Total Teacher Size of School for School Year Ended 30th June	1961	1970	1980	1990	1995	Increase + Decrease –
1	741	401	133	124	123	- 618
2	2,499	1,725	972	720	690	-1809
3	916	774	563	553	544	- 372
4	218	389	460	454	417	+ 199
5	99	173	260	293	263	+ 164
6	68	105	151	196	183	+ 115
7	53	55	102	115	150	+ 97
8	60	61	55	109	113	+ 53
9	36	47	64	88	88	+ 52
10	42	54	64	69	60	+ 18
11	30	45	52	73	100	+ 70
12	23	43	47	67	76	+ 53
13	27	30	39	52	61	+ 34
14	23	27	43	54	51	+ 28
15	9	22	42	43	46	+ 37
16	13	20	45	33	28	+ 15
17	5	18	31	37	42	+ 37
18	1	9	32	51	33	+ 32
19	5	13	22	28	42	+ 37
20+	13	36	126	83	93	+ 80
Total	4,881	4,047	3,303	3,242	3,203	- 1,678

During the 35 year period indicated in table 4, the decline in the number of 1, 2 and 3, teacher schools (-1,799) is greater than the number of schools lost to the system during that period (-1, 678). In all other categories, from schools of 4 teachers and upwards, the number of such schools has grown in every case. Despite the obviously dramatic decline in the number of small rural schools during this period, the fact remains that there are more 2 and 3 teacher schools in Ireland than any other school category: 690 and 544 respectively. It is important, therefore, before proceeding to interrogate policy perspectives which have allowed or perhaps precipitated this decline, to outline the scale of the problem in a little more detail.

The major demarcation in terms of school size among the primary teaching profession generally as well as policy makers, is whether or not a school has sufficient pupils on roll to warrant an administrative principal. Consequently, schools are divided into two very broad categories: those with more than 8 teachers who have 'walking' principals, and those who have less and have 'teaching' principals. Even at trade union level, negotiations tend to be conducted on the basis of these two general categories so that smaller schools tend not to have a voice. However, table five indicates that collectively, schools of 8 teachers or less constitute more than three quarters of the total number of schools in the country.

Table 5: School Size as percentage of the total number of primary schools

No. of Teachers	Number of Schools	Percentage of Total
1	123	3.8%
1 & 2	813	25.4%
1, 2 & 3	1, 357	42.4%
1,2, 3 & 4	1, 774	55.4%
1, 2, 3, 4 & 5	2, 037	63.5%
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, & 6	2, 220	69.3%
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, & 7	2, 370	73.9%
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 & 8	2, 483	77.5%

While there is no absolute definition of what constitutes a small school, whether it is 3, 4 or 5 teachers, or if a school just outside a village or small town is rural in the same manner as a school in a more isolated or inaccessible location, the fact remains that even if 4 teachers is the cut off point in terms of what constitutes a 'small' school, and no such criteria exist in the Irish context, there is no weighted funding which compensates for school size. Yet, more than 55% of all schools have 4 teachers or less. While the proportion of pupils as a fraction of the total school going population is significantly less, these schools constitute an important element of the entire system: far too important to be ignored. It is important, therefore, to identify reasons for the general neglect of small rural schools, and to interrogate recently enunciated policies as to their possible impact on such schools.

Policies and the Future of Small Rural Schools

In the early sixties, which coincided with the Irish Government's first five-year plan for economic expansion, the number of small rural schools in poor condition became an important focus for policy-makers who were increasingly taking a proactive role in the field of education rather than acquiescing to the hegemony of Church authorities in their role as school owners and managers with responsibility for their maintenance. With the moral authority of an OECD report, *Investment in Education* (1966), to bolster their resolve, policy makers favoured the "economic rationalists" approach which was critical of the "high cost of maintaining small schools" so that in the subsequent decade there were many forced amalgamations of small schools where communities were 'persuaded' that the quality of their childrens' education would be enhanced by providing larger schools with better facilities. Consequently, "from the early 1960s an active policy was adopted of closing small schools wherever possible" (OECD, 1991, p. 57).

Many adults in rural communities today are very adamant that this policy shift precipitated the decline of their communities, and are, therefore, very determined that similar policies will not be imposed in the future. While there was net immigration from the mid-sixties to the late seventies, mass emigration in the eighties in tandem with a significant decline in the birthrate during the same decade, as well as the impact of urbanisation and industrialisation, have resulted in many small rural schools coming under increased pressure for further rationalisation. Although the OECD examiners in 1991 recognised the benefits of small schools and their importance for rural regeneration, they nevertheless encouraged "amalgamations aiming at four-teacher primary schools" (OECD, 1991, p. 58). This recommendation, if effected, would result in the closure of 1, 357 schools. Decline in rural population during this period to a significant degree remained hidden and unheeded as the system generally was going through an expansionary phase. However, for primary schools generally, this period has ended, contraction and rationalisation are inevitable with obvious implications for small rural schools.

Following the OECD report (1991) a subsequent Government Green Paper in Education- *Education for A Changing World*- (Ireland, 1992), recommended the elimination of 1, 2 and 3 teacher schools as a policy option. However, this option gave rise to sustained and heated debate at the National Education Convention in 1994. This debate is summarised as follows:

> While the Green Paper envisaged dramatic reductions in the number of schools at primary ... level in the coming years, it gave very little attention to the complexities involved in this process or the sophisticated planning required to minimise its potentially harmful side-effects. The issue of school rationalisation was a major one at the National Education Convention, with many representatives extolling the virtues of the small school and others deploring the inadequate policies which existed with regard to school amalgamations (Coolahan, 1994, p. 34).

The report continues that because "the number of primary pupils [is] expected to decline by over 100, 000 between 1991 and 2001" rationalisation is inevitable, but this needs to be done in a planned coherent manner (Coolahan, 1994, p. 34). The report did not wish to evade frequently cited disadvantages of small schools such as the possibility of "more limited curriculum" and "limitations in physical resources" as well as the difficulties in such circumstances of providing "remedial teaching, while attempting to address the "professional isolation of teachers and the disproportionate effects which a persistently under-performing teacher would have on the educational careers of the children in such schools" (Coolahan, 1994, p. 36). It was the view of the Convention's Secretariat that "a blanket bureaucratic decision that all schools of a particular size should be closed would not be satisfactory" (Coolahan, 1994, p. 36). It would be necessary, it suggested, to provide details in relation to the age and condition of schools, distances between schools, demographic projections, unit costs and associated data. Arising from this inventory, it should be feasible to provide "minimum standards and criteria for small schools against which arguments for closure or amalgamation could be assessed" (Coolahan, 1994, p. 36). Nevertheless, it has emphasized that "educational quality and not school size *per se*" should be "the main criterion" for rationalisation. Even where a good school is deemed non-viable according to identified criteria, additional support if necessary should be "considered sympathetically" (Coolahan, 1994 p. 36). This perspective represents a significant shift away from the economic rationalist argument which found exclusive favour in previous decades. It is reasonable to conclude also that comments at the convention are an indictment of a lack of policy in relation to small schools and a criticism of the demise of many such schools as a consequence of benign neglect rather than malign intent.

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As a consequence of the criticisms of the policy option expressed in the Green Paper (Ireland, 1992) following the OECD report (1991), the more recent White Paper (1995) in education- *Charting Our Education Future*- (Ireland, 1995) dropped the suggestion to eliminate all schools of 3 teachers and less. However, the reality is that due to a precipitous decline in the birthrate (see table 3 above), rationalisation is unavoidable, and without coherent policies in this regard many more small schools will close by default rather than by design.

Other, more general issues that have exacerbated the decline of small rural schools and led to their general neglect as organisations with distinct characteristics and needs, are the location of policy and decision-makers in large urban centres as well as urban or suburban locations for Colleges of Education and education departments in Universities. Additionally, school principals do not have their own organisation independent of the only union which represents all primary teachers in the country, though in the last 3 years, principals of small schools in particular have been able to give voice to their particular concerns as a consequence of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation providing an annual Forum for principals and an annual National Principals' Conference being organised by an *ad hoc* group of primary principals. Recent policy documents, which reflect the almost global language of new right managerialism, seem much more concerned with decentralisation and devolution of decision-making to the individual school, with greater accountability and transparency, rather than developing coherent policies in relation to the future of small rural schools (Ireland, 1992, 1995). The minister for education established the Commission on School Accommodation and Needs (COSAN) in 1995 to examine this issue in detail at both primary and secondary levels. However, the recently threatened strike action in 100 hundred small rural schools because of a dispute with the minister in relation to the redeployment of 30 teachers, does not augur well for future negotiations (Cullen, 1996).

Problems in Small Rural Schools

It is probably already apparent from comments above that at an official level, there has been little or no effort to conduct research into the particular problems encountered by teachers in small schools. It is the case also that small schools are a neglected area of the educational landscape as far as more small scale research conducted by Colleges and University departments of education is concerned. Nevertheless, some small scale individual studies have been undertaken and these enable me to construct a tentative picture of the realities of classroom life in such schools.

In a survey conducted by the INTO of all one-teacher schools, there was common concern about issues of safety, hygiene, poor school grounds, lack of ancillary staff for cleaning and routine maintenance, and inadequate heating (INTO, 1994a). Additionally, these teachers were always on duty as there was no provision for supervision of pupils during break times. More pertinent professional issues identified were isolation, and the difficulties of teaching all eight standards in the school (INTO, 1994a, p. 1).

A more comprehensive report which the INTO completed on educational disadvantage, with particular reference to rural disadvantage, indicates very clearly the manner in which current policies militate against small isolated schools. For example, in communities where there are one-teacher schools, the department of education provides school transport for pupils to attend alternative schools in the locale. This suggest that current policy is designed to make the smallest schools non-viable (INTO, 1994b). The report points out that while urban disadvantage has been recognised and addressed, however inadequately, rural disadvantage is only now "being brought to light" (INTO, 1994b, p. 67). A litany of grievances is provided which demonstrates that small rural schools do not receive the same level of service as larger urban schools particularly where access to library facilities, remedial

and psychological services and curriculum resources generally is concerned. Apart from access to specific services which larger schools take for granted, "the Department of Education funding system for small schools also militates against them because of the inadequacy of the minimum capitation grant system" (INTO, 1994b, p. 69). Without some differential funding which is not based on enrolments, small schools are not in a position to provide the kinds of resources and facilities available in larger schools. Teachers, in these circumstances suffer chronic isolation as they are usually furthest from Education Centres, and pupils suffer similar losses from an extra-curricular point of view as "inter schools sports competitions and other school related cultural and social activities" prove extremely difficult to organise (INTO, 1994b, p. 69).

Since the introduction of a school transport system in 1967, it has appeared as absurd to me the fact that this fleet of busses is available for travel to and from school only when as a resource they could be much more widely deployed for school outings and inter-schools activities in rural areas. As a first step in addressing the particular needs of small rural schools, it is necessary for policy-makers to recognise their particular needs and to frame appropriate policies for their alleviation. To date, there is little evidence that these schools are receiving the preferential attention which they require.

Principals of small rural schools feel particularly aggrieved by lack of appropriate policies and structures in relation to their dual role as teachers and administrators as official policy statements do not distinguish between administrative principals and those who have full-time teaching duties (Ireland, 1995). To add insult to injury, the recent White Paper on education suggested that administrative principals be appointed in future for a fixed term of seven years, but it was not intended that this policy apply to teaching principals (Ireland, 1995). It is not surprising, therefore, that in a study of 12 teaching principals of rural schools

the following were identified as major constraints on them fulfilling their role as leaders and administrators as well as classroom teachers (O'Hanrahan, 1995). In schools which ranged in size from 7 to 3 teachers, under the general heading of contextual constraints, they identified the following impediments: "lack of middle management teaching staff, lack of ancillary services, inadequate school facilities, constraints imposed by multi-class teaching, and unsatisfactory support from Boards of Management" (O'Hanrahan, 1995, p. 32). While they regarded teaching as their primary function, and administration their most pressing need, beyond this, issues such as facilitating professional development of staff, and evaluating the work of the school did not even feature in the first ten of their priorities. Yet, research literature on effective schooling suggests that instructional leadership is the key to effective schools (Mortimore et al. 1988; Fullan, 1991, 1993). Though all of the participants in this study devoted considerable time to school issues outside of normal school hours, they indicated that unless many routine administrative duties could be delegated to members of the school's Board of Management or parents, dealing with leadership, curriculum and evaluation issues would continue to be ignored, neglected or dealt with sporadically.

Recent policy statements in the education White Paper (Ireland, 1995) recognise the need for more adequate training for school principals in managing change, and planning the curriculum at school level, and it advocates "networks" as an effective means of addressing issues of isolation and of sustaining and supporting professional development, but no concerted effort has been made to bring these policy positions to fruition. Clearly, therefore, there is an urgent need to address a number of issues to ensure the future of some (not all) small schools and the quality of the teaching and learning which they provide.

Some Possibilities for Small Rural Schools

There is no escaping the growing reality that a significant decline in the birthrate is beginning to have serious impact on school size generally in Ireland and small rural schools are likely to be most adversely affected with further closures an inevitability. Nevertheless, there are a number of immediate tasks which can be undertaken so that rationalisation is advanced in a planned and coherent manner. Towards this end, the social geography of small rural schools needs to be thoroughly researched: the distribution and location of these schools mapped. This comprehensive mapping needs to form the basis of future planning. A further dimension of this mapping exercise will be to indicate the age distribution of teachers in such schools so that perhaps a policy of early retirement can be selectively applied to distribute new blood in the profession more evenly.

A further research agenda is the identification and generation of a research literature which is grounded in the realities of small rural schools with a view to generating appropriate criteria on quality teaching and learning in such schools. These criteria must become an important dimension of policy-making, particularly in relation to professional support.

At a practical policy level, there is urgent need to introduce a more flexible staffing policy in relation to ancillary staff and the deployment of part-time teachers between clusters of schools.

In the meantime, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that children continue to be educated in small rural schools regardless of the future of these organisations. Consequently, there is a pressing and immediate need to provide appropriate clustering and networking of schools to overcome professional isolation, to pool resources and expertise and to address problems of common interest with resolve while harnessing community support also in this

endeavour. This urgent requirement must not be postponed and, no doubt, lessons from elsewhere in this regard can provide an important impetus.

Notes

1. Ordinary in this context refers to regular primary school, while there are more than 100 special schools which cater for pupils with a variety of special needs.

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